

Preface: Statewide Ridge House Collaborative

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NIJ has identified some key outcome variables and other parameters of interest for this project and has also provided some guidance on possible evaluation designs. Applicants may depart from this guidance by providing appropriate rationale.

This project is supported with funds from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). NIJ solicited an outcome evaluation of the Ridge House under a previous BJA evaluation solicitation and did not receive any proposals that it considered sufficient for funding. Therefore, NIJ is competing the evaluation again under this solicitation.

Although the Ridge House follows a faith-oriented curriculum, participation in faith activities is voluntary. This setting provides an opportunity to explore a separable contribution of faith to reentry outcomes. Readers should also note that (1) the assignment of returning inmates to the Ridge House occurs at a central point in the Nevada Department of Corrections and (2) there is excess demand for the Ridge House program. These two conditions suggest a potential for randomized assignment to the program. Ridge House does not object to randomized assignment provided that inmates assigned conform to the program's entry requirements. There is no information on the Nevada Department of Corrections' interest in participating in a controlled experiment.

NIJ expects the cost of this evaluation to be no less than \$400,000. The total funds available for all six evaluations covered by this solicitation are approximately \$5 million.

Evaluability Assessment: Statewide Ridge House Collaborative

SYNOPSIS

Grantee: Ridge House, Inc. (2001BDDBBXB0044)

Grant Period: July 1, 2002–June 30, 2003

Current Award: \$423,000

Funding History: Unknown.

Project Summary: Acting as a service provider for the Nevada Department of Parole and Probation, Ridge House works with male and female felons in a residential, family-type setting to reduce recidivism and psychological barriers to employment and treatment. It was developed as an extension of KAIROS, a faith-based prison ministry, and has close ties to the faith community in each of the communities it serves. KAIROS is an interdenominational Christian ministry in State and Federal prisons that offers a structured program of Christian teaching through prison chaplains and laity. Although it operates in many prisons in the country, its headquarters are in Winter Park, Florida. Ridge House is also a consultant to The Seventh Day Adventist Church/Haven Bound Prison Ministry in Northern Nevada. The “faith” component of Ridge House is, however, non-denominational. It affiliates its service programs with all religions, including non-Christian religions, and includes “rational models” for agnostics. Currently six residential facilities house seven clients each. A seventh house, which is relatively new, is located in Las Vegas, and all other facilities are located in Reno.

Started in 1982, the program initially operated as a halfway house or safe house for persons just out of prison. By the late 1980s, data indicated that graduates of the Ridge House Program returned to prison at rates comparable to the general population of releasees. Program services were then added that focused on a range of services intended to improve recidivism rates. In addition, the participants in the program at the time developed what are now the residency rules under which participants in all of the houses live. The program now operates multiple gender-specific facilities and can handle 225B250 clients annually in its Nevada facilities.

The setting provides medical and dental assessment and service referral; in-house GED prep and computer training; employment mentoring; a 12-step drug treatment program; counseling that deals with stress reduction, anger management, and conflict resolution; and vocational career preparation. Residents stay on average 3B6 months. House managers mentor and supervise support groups in a program identified as addressing “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and Glasser’s Theory of Personal Responsibility.”

This program is a good candidate for evaluation. There is a strong likelihood that the number of parolees who sign up for the program at release cannot be accommodated in time, creating a pool of like candidates to use as a control group. It is also a well-established program that has years of operational experience. Finally, this is a faith-based program that relies on a strong spiritual component in its programming.

Scope of Evaluation: The evaluation should have two focuses: (1) the program's organization and its ability to meet administrative goals and (2) the program's ability to reduce recidivism, which could be done by comparing Ridge House participants with those not receiving services.

ANALYSIS

There have been a number of programs historically that use milieu therapy to reinforce pro-social activities. There also are many halfway houses that provide residential support to offenders leaving prison. Ridge House combines the two approaches. The program is based on a psychological mode of change and is well articulated by staff. It is a faith-based program in which staff, many of whom are Christians, use a reality-based approach to the interventions. Spirituality and faith is essential but not sufficient in their view in rehabilitating offenders. Staff and clients openly speak of a relationship with God and the importance of that relationship in the rehabilitation process. The in-prison KAIROS program provides some recruits for the program. However, given that the in-prison program is small, the majority of participants are recruited directly from prison or parole.

What do we know about projects like these? What could an evaluation add to what we know?

In many sites, offenders are released into the community with no job and lack skills needed to get and retain a job. Increased numbers of offenders serve their full sentence (rather than being released on parole) yet receive neither supervision nor services after release. For example, in some jurisdictions persons are released from the jail system late at night with a subway pass and little else or with as little as \$17 spending money, too little to pay for an evening of shelter. An evaluation of Ridge House, then, could look at how residential support programs for ex-offenders improve recidivism rates and prepare ex-offenders for release back into society compared with other programs.

Early programs in the 1960s were outgrowths of the idea that job training would reduce subsequent criminality. The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) provided Federal training funds for a wide array of services similar to those found in the current mix of programs, including vocational and technical training, basic education and literacy services, and job placement. While most of the funding was directed at youths, some participants were adults with arrest records. In the 1970s, the Transitional Aid Research Project (TARP) provided unemployment compensation and job training and placement services in a number of sites in an attempt to reduce recidivism. Evaluation of these programs, however, has showed no effect on recidivism from any combination of services. In the same era, the Living Insurance for Ex-Offenders (LIFE) program provided equally disappointing results (Berk et al., 1980). A larger

replication of this program found no differences between groups getting combinations of services or nothing (Rossi, Berk, and Lenihan, 1980).

In the 1970s, the Wildcat Services Corporation program provided supported work for unemployed former heroin using ex-offenders. In this program men worked on work crews for subsidized wages, gradually increasing their work responsibilities and training options. Because of the drug use tie in this program, counseling was also available. All participants had 18 months to find a full-time job. A Vera Institute study of this program showed increased employment stability and earnings, but the effect diminished at the end of 3 years. The effect on recidivism was similar.

In the 1980s and 90s, a number of studies were conducted on the relationship between employment and recidivism. Harer (1994) found in a sample of Federal releasees that recidivism was higher among minorities, as well as those who were employed prior to incarceration, those with the most stable post-release housing, and those placed in pre-release employment. Finn and Willoughby (1996) substantiated these findings in a study of ex-offenders who participated in the JTPA programs in the late 1980s. These findings prompted more recent programs for ex-offenders that deal with substance abuse, cognitive restructuring, and housing.

The Opportunities to Succeed program (OPTS), a more recent program, focuses on substance abuse as well as employment issues for ex-offenders. This program provides intensive supervision, drug treatment, skills and vocational training, family services, and medical services. In a random assignment evaluation of OPTS= effectiveness, researchers (Rossman et al., 1998) found a positive effect on employment among the substance abusing offenders in the program.

Elsewhere, the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) annually funds programming for about 1,800 men and women in New York State. The participants are those who have been in the State penal system or are on probation and have been convicted of non-violent offenses. The CEO program is based on transitional work phases in which participants work in the community on contracts with State agencies to provide general maintenance, cleaning, and other services. CEO operates more than 40 supervised work crews. Services include job readiness training; access to a job placement case manager; paid transition employment (Neighborhood Work Project) for a short period of time; and job development, placement, and post-placement services (Vocational Development Program). CEO works with local companies to place participants. The program is similar to Ridge House in many ways except that it provides no residential support.

The Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC) in Broward County, Florida, operates Second Chance, an employment and training services project for ex-offenders. The program offers such services as employment readiness training, assistance with coordinating childcare, transportation, and job placement. It does not provide residential assistance or supported work (i.e., phased or staged work experiences).

The Better People project (Portland, Oregon) works to develop job skills in ex-offenders, but it primarily focuses on cognitive restructuring activities. Using the moral reconnection therapy (MRT) model, the program seeks to change the way offenders think and provide them with employment counseling and placement. Participation in the highly structured MRT program is required of all participants, which makes it different from most other programs. Better People is both similar to and different from Ridge House: It's similar in that it recruits participants from a number of places, not just directly or primarily from prisons and jails; and it's different in that it is a non-residential program. Better People also works with other agencies to provide transitional work for its participants. They give seminars on the program in facilities and enroll walk-in participants and those referred by parole officers and other prisoners.

These programs share many common elements: job readiness training, some skills development, and placement assistance. Some also include supported work and substance abuse services. However, the residential component sets Ridge House apart from the rest. In order to graduate from the program, participants must obtain both residency and employment. The residential requirement also results in some level of surveillance of behavior.

What audiences would benefit from this evaluation? What could they do with the findings?

There are a number of programs that provide case management for offenders leaving prisons. This program adds residential support to the group processes that are put into play, much like therapeutic communities or milieu therapy communities in substance abuse literature. This would be of interest as a value-added component of community corrections. The audience for an administrative evaluation would be departments of corrections or private foundations that run multiple facilities using the same model.

The most interesting aspect of this program, arguably, is the faith-based component. It is an essential part of the program.

Is the grantee interested in being evaluated?

Yes, with some qualifications. They face funding crises and need supporting evaluation. They are also confident of their success and open to a full evaluation.

What is the history of the project?

Ridge House was established in 1982 as a 501 c (3) nonprofit organization operating in Northern Nevada. It was an extension of a prison-based ministry. Based on data that indicated that many of their participants were returning to prison, the program decided to conduct a needs assessment to study the services that they offered and those that were needed by participants. The results indicated that there were a number of services and changes in operations needed to stabilize residents during their stay as well as into their post-graduation entry into the community. There is a strong emphasis on the drug and alcohol problems of residents, and the program sees itself as an aftercare program to in-prison

therapeutic communities as well as a primary care setting for those who do not have the in-prison experience. New components were implemented into the family style facilities. The program has expanded from its original three facilities in Northern Nevada to three more in Southern Nevada. A seventh facility opened in November 2002. All facilities follow the same programming.

Aside from BJA, Ridge House receives funding from the Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, local government (Office of Criminal Justice), and the United Way. Client fees and private foundations are expected to contribute \$1.2 million to the development of the Reno facilities and to the maintenance of the Las Vegas facility.

At what stage of implementation is it?

The existing program has been in operation for many years, yet this new addition is only in its initial phases. The program model does not change with new funds or facilities. Each house serves approximately seven residents; no house can have more than five felons in the residence at one time. A full-time house manager resides in and staffs each house. These are in general persons in recovery. Each house also contains a counselor who splits his/her time between working with the residents (75 percent of the time) and with graduates (25 percent of the time) who come back for support and service referrals for as much as 2 years.

What are the project's outcome goals in the view of the project director?

The outcome goals for this grant were to establish a new facility and to coordinate the continuity of care from the other facilities with the new one. The goals of the entire program are far broader: Reduce recidivism to below the statewide average for graduates of Ridge House and reduce relapse to substance abuse.

Does the proposal/director describe key project elements? Can you sketch the logic by which activities affect goals?

Again, the decision as to whether this is an organizational evaluation or a client outcomes evaluation make the models, of course, very different. The overall goals of the Ridge House program are well articulated by the director, who has been with the program since its inception. Operating under the assumption that client-level outcomes are the evaluation of interest, the program model is based on the premise that drug and alcohol problems are endemic to the prison population and that these problems seriously limit the ability of ex-offenders to stay away from crime. The logic model that guides the program could be seen as having several goals: increase life skills and training and eliminate drug use to impact on return to crime; and increase spiritual and psychological resources of ex-offenders to impact on return to crime.

The program argues that even for those prisoners who receive treatment while incarcerated, few receive aftercare and are faced with the stressors of returning to the community. Without an aftercare program and “appropriate debriefing of prison culture,” the offender is at great risk for failure. This model argues that full attention to all aspects of the reconditioning of the offender can only be given in a residential program that provides a range of health and employment services as well as group support. The primary elements are: residential support, onsite 12-step drug and alcohol treatment; employment preparation; and mentoring by paraprofessional staff. If a resident needs detoxification, that referral will be made. All other treatment is assumed under the 12-step regimen of meetings and peer counseling. Residents must gain the first employment themselves and full employment is a requirement of program participation. Regular parole would give some of the same services (referrals to drug treatment, assistance with employment) but would not provide the setting to reinforce prosocial behaviors needed to stay both clean and out of trouble.

Are there other local projects providing similar services that could be used for comparison?

The logical comparison is a routine or even an intensive supervision project operating out of parole. The focus of Ridge House is that it offers a family style residential setting that continuously reinforces positive behaviors and deinstitutionalizes the offender from prison experiences. The referral system Ridge House provides is likely to be very similar to that provided by intensive supervision. These would be logical comparisons. An evaluation of the program could look at how residential support programs for ex-offenders improve recidivism rates compared with other offender programs.

Will samples that figure into outcome measurement be large enough to generate statistically significant findings for model effect sizes?

The Ridge House system serves potentially more than 200 clients each year. The pool of participants is developed from parole referrals and recruited directly from the releasees in recruiting sessions in various prisons. A comparison group might be those released to parole but not into a residential facility such as this. For example, Ridge House does not operate in all cities. Parolees released in other areas of the State might be possible comparisons. There might also be an excess of willing participants that might be utilized as a control group, given that Ridge House is fairly small and the number of interested participants seems, according to the director, to be quite large. If the Nevada Department of Corrections (NDOC) could be convinced to generate a pool of eligibles from which a control group could be established, the comparison group would be available. This would also allow parole records to be used in following the progress of the comparison group.

Is the grantee planning an evaluation? What data systems exist that would facilitate evaluation? What are the key data elements in this system?

There are some record-keeping efforts already in place. The first, conducted since 1991, is a yearly audit done by the NDOC of participants who have been rearrested. The rates are then compared to

those Statewide. The second, in operation since 1993, is an internal data system that measures utilization, readmission, discharge rates, and client self-sufficiency. It also includes client demographics, employment status at discharge, and all bio/social/psycho information for tracking. These data are summarized each year. In addition, Ridge House has conducted a Client Satisfaction Survey since 1999, consisting of client criteria of service components and providers at graduation. Finally, there is a system to track internal expenditures and funding sources; it is conducted three times each year.

Are there data about a possible comparison sample?

As mentioned above, the data for comparison could come from the records of persons operating in the regular parole system. These data should include the sample or comparable data as collected in the internal Ridge House systems. The evaluation would work best if limited to parolees, as this would make for a good comparison group.

In general, how useful are the data systems to an impact evaluation?

If the evaluators were able to access the parole data at a client level, it should be adequate for an impact evaluation. This also assumes that impact will be measured as rates of recidivism and/or employment attainment, rather than relapse to drug use. Perhaps the evaluation could augment arrest data with records from parole. If the evaluation was extended through interviews, a sample of participants and controls would be selected to better understand experiences. The large evaluation would include at least 200 cases of participants and 200 controls.

Site Visit Evaluability Assessment

BJA funds only a small part of the Ridge House effort, an administrative effort to add a facility and coordinate between facilities. If this were the goal, the evaluation would be one of the organization rather than the outcomes of clients. If the desire was to evaluate outcomes for Ridge House participants versus others released onto regular, non-residential parole supervision, this is also possible. It would be important to determine in more detail what the data systems are from parole and the level of cooperation the evaluator might expect.

Is the project being implemented as advertised?

Yes. This is a relatively long-standing program with clear goals and program elements.

What is the intervention to be evaluated?

See above.

What outcomes could be assessed? By whom?

While Ridge House also emphasizes substance abuse and incorporates being clean and sober into house rules, reducing recidivism is its primary goal. Staff from the NDOC currently assess this goal annually by comparing arrest rates of participants and graduates against the average rate statewide. The relationship already established with NDOC is a good start in an evaluation. Evaluating relapse is more difficult, as is determining if all participants and controls are employed.

Are there valid comparison groups?

Yes. Ridge House receives applications from prisoners who want a place to live upon release, and the Nevada Parole Board is unlikely to release an offender who has no place to go. Ridge House recruiters read the applications interview by phone and in person at the prison. The approval then goes to the parole board who sets a parole date, and the offender waits for a slot to open at Ridge House. There are about 750 applicants a year and only 250 places. This indicates that many offenders are released before a slot becomes available and could serve as a control group.

Is random assignment possible?

Given the mission of the program, random assignment is doubtful. However, a good quasi-experimental design is possible in this setting given the way parole releases occur.

What threats to a sound evaluation are most likely to occur?

If Ridge House served all of those who signed up for the program, the evaluation would be at a loss for a good control group. This does not look like the case.

Are there hidden strengths in the project?

The faith-based component of the project is an important element not found in other programs. It is also a well-established program with good community connections.

What are the sizes and characteristics of the target population? How large would target and comparisons be at 1 year?

The program serves 225B250 participants each year (75 percent male and 25 percent female). They are all persons who have served time in the State or county correctional facilities. Some come directly from incarceration; others have been released for longer periods of time. The drop-out rate is, according to the director, about 8 percent.

How is the target population identified (eligibility criteria)?

Potential participants are identified through parole and through in-prison recruitment.

Have the characteristics of the target population changed over time?

Unknown.

What would the target population receive in a comparison sample?

The comparison sample would receive the regular parole supervision services offered by the State.

What are the shortcomings/gaps in delivering the intervention?

The substance abuse component is a 12-step program. The staff includes some ministers and a few treatment professionals, yet there may not be any accredited substance abuse counselors. It is not clear at this time how needs assessment for any referrals to detox are made, except that staff indicate that participants may be referred to detox if they relapse.

What do recipients of the intervention think the project does? How do they assess the services received?

The participants in the group session observed were supportive and enthusiastic of the program.

What kinds of data elements are available from existing data sources?

The internal data control system described in the proposal measures utilization, readmission, discharge status, and “self-sufficiency.” It also constrains demographics, employment at discharge, and other information “for tracking purposes.” The format and complete list of data elements need further examination to determine its overall utility for evaluation purposes.

What specific input, process, and outcomes measures would they support?

The system may support process evaluation criteria as well as some client-level outcomes analysis.

Can target populations be followed over time?

Yes, but if recidivism is the outcome of greatest interest, this may not be needed.

Can services delivered be identified? Can systems help diagnose implementation problems?

The system records progress of the client but not necessarily in the detail (numbers of 12-step groups attended and days on the job by client) that would be ideal.

Do staff tell consistent stories about the project?

Yes. Onsite visits indicated that both the administrator and the staff described the program elements and the underlying models clearly and with conviction.

Are their backgrounds appropriate for the activities?

Yes. While certified drug counselors may not be part of the staff, the model is a 12-step one that relies on non-professional peer reinforcement for operation. The staff also is experienced and includes professionals. A psychologist with a Master's degree ran the session attended, for example.

What do project partners receive?

There are no partners.

What changes is the director willing to make to support the evaluation?

The director is very enthusiastic about an evaluation. While it was not specifically discussed, she appeared willing to make reasonable changes (like record keeping changes) should they be evaluated.

Would you recommend the project be evaluated?

Yes. This is an interesting program with the potential to provide data on the efficacy of faith-based programming for offenders. There also is the possibility of a good comparison group readily available through excess demand for the service.